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#32

#130

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I WAKE ON COLD STONE, HEARING A SINGLE SOUND REPEATED OVER AND OVER AGAIN, AS IF IT'S COMING FROM A DREAM:

SNAP.

WHUD

UKK

SNAP. THE BRUTAL TRUTH OF IT CLATTERS LIKE A DRILL HAMMER ON MY MIND: *"END OF THE LINE, WEB-SLINGER -- BROKEN **NECK**... BETTER LUCK NEXT TIME."*

IT'S AS MUCH AS I CAN DO TO ***BREATHE.*** THAT CRASHING SOUND IS THE SOUND OF MY FUTURE, SHATTERED. IT'S ALL ***OVER.***

I'LL NEVER WALK ***AGAIN.***

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THE GREAT SPIDER-MAN -- BANE OF THE CRIMINAL SET -- CUT DOWN IN HIS PRIME: *OH,* HOW THE SINGLE MOTHERS OF MANHATTAN WILL ***WEEP*** WHEN THEY HEAR THE NEWS.

HOW THE CITY WILL MOURN FOR THE LOSS OF ITS RAMBUNCTIOUS LITTLE VIGILANTE IN RED, BLACK AND BLUE. *"THIS WAS THE DAY OUR HERO FELL, NEVER TO RISE AGAIN."*

BUT TOMORROW, THEY'LL MOURN YOU A LITTLE ***LESS,*** SPIDER-MAN.

HUFF

THE PAIN WILL GO AWAY, A DIFFERENT HERO WILL COME TO TAKE YOUR PLACE...

...AND BY NEXT WEEK YOU'LL FADE INTO A FOND ***REMEMBRANCE.***

NO ONE WILL UNDERSTAND WHAT HAPPENED HERE TODAY. NO ONE WILL CARE.

NO ONE...

"...BUT YOU."

I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE THINKING.

YOU'RE THINKING ABOUT ALL THOSE *PEOPLE* WHO DIED.

YOUR NECK IS BROKEN...YOU'RE BEYOND HOPE, COMPLETELY AT MY MERCY.

BUT YOU CAN'T *HELP* YOURSELF, CAN YOU?

HERE'S A LITTLE POISONED FOOD FOR THOUGHT FOR YOU TO CHOKE ON: THE BOMB THAT BLEW UP THE EDGAR BUILDING WOULD NEVER HAVE EXPLODED IF *YOU* HADN'T STOPPED IT FROM FALLING.

THE DEVICE WAS WIRED TO AN ALTIMETER, PRIMED TO DETONATE IF THE NEEDLE STOPPED BEFORE IT REACHED ZERO. IF IT HAD BEEN ALLOWED TO FALL, IT WOULD HAVE LANDED HARMLESSLY.

BUT INSTEAD *YOU* STEPPED IN TO SAVE THE DAY. *THINK* ABOUT IT, SPIDER-MAN:

=UKK=

CRASH

THREE HUNDRED PEOPLE ARE DEAD BECAUSE YOU CHOSE TO BE A *HERO.*

LYING ON THE FLOOR OF FUSION'S HIDEOUT, I TRY TO MAKE SENSE OF WHAT'S HAPPENED.

BUT I *CAN'T.*

CAN'T HEAR MYSELF THINK. CAN'T MOVE MY FINGERS. IF I COULD JUST...

I'M SUPPOSED TO *BE* SOMEWHERE -- I PROMISED CARYN I'D FEED BARKER. HE'LL BE WAITING. *HUNGRY.*

IF SHE FINDS OUT I DIDN'T FEED HIM, SHE'LL FREAK. I DON'T KNOW WHAT I'M GOING TO SAY WHEN I...

DON'T KNOW IF I'LL EVER...I'LL NEVER...

MOVE.

NO...THIS *CAN'T* BE RIGHT -- I MUST'VE *FORGOTTEN* SOMETHING. DID I LEAVE THE FRIDGE DOOR OPEN?

CARROTS. THAT'S IT... I DIDN'T PICK UP ANY *CARROTS.* I NEVER EAT CARROTS.

NEVER.

I'LL NEVER...

I'LL NEVER WALK *AGAIN.*

I'M SPIDER-MAN.

I CAN'T GIVE UP.

I'VE GOT TO...TRY.

GOT TO FOCUS... ON SOMETHING ELSE.

JONAH -- WHAT'S HE DOING RIGHT NOW? CHEWING SOMEONE OUT, PROBABLY.

HEHH... UH...

MAYBE IT'S JUST TEMPORARY.

COME ON...MOVE, DAMN YOU. MOVE.

PLEASE.

PLEASE MOVE.

AN IMAGE APPEARS IN MY MIND'S EYE...A MEMORY OF THE FUTURE, IF SUCH A THING IS POSSIBLE. IT'S LIKE I REMEMBER AN IMPOSSIBLE SECRET THAT SOMEONE ONCE TOLD ME...

...IS THIS ME?

WHAT'S HAPPENING TO ME? WHERE'S FUSION -- WHY DIDN'T HE COME BACK?

WHY DOESN'T HE...?

MOVE!

MARY JANE'S GOING TO BE SO *SCARED* WHEN SHE FINDS OUT.

I MISS HER SO MUCH.

WHAT IF SHE *DOESN'T* FIND OUT? WHAT IF I DIE HERE?

WHAT IF I NEVER...

NEVER.

WALK.

AGAIN.

I DON'T WANT TO KNOW WHO YOU ARE UNDER THAT MASK. I DON'T WANT TO KNOW THAT YOU HAVE A FACE.

YOU'RE NOT A *PERSON* TO ME.

...HHH... WHHHY4...?

BECAUSE OF *YOU*. BECAUSE YOU FANCIED YOURSELF A PUBLIC SERVANT, BUT YOU COULDN'T CUT IT.

YOU COULDN'T EVEN SAVE ONE LITTLE BOY.

...WASN'T... MY...

...*FAULT*...

AND BECAUSE YOU ARE A *LIAR*.

YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO BE A FORCE FOR GOOD, SPIDER-MAN --

-- A BEACON OF BRAVERY WHERE ALL AROUND YOU WAS DARK.

BUT YOU LOST YOUR WAY. YOU FORGOT THAT SELF-IMPOSED EDICT OF YOURS:

SERVE AND *PROTECT.*

MY FRANCIS WAS JUST A LITTLE BOY WHO RELIED ON THE HELP OF HIS HERO. YOU BROKE HIS TRUST.

WHAT DO YOU THINK WENT THROUGH MY SON'S MIND AS THE STRING SNAPPED AND HE PLUMMETED TO EARTH, SPIDER-MAN? DO YOU THINK HE WONDERED WHERE YOU *WERE?*

EVEN AS HIS SHATTERED LITTLE FRAME HIT THE GROUND, DID HE STILL BELIEVE YOU WERE GOING TO *SAVE* HIM?

OR DO YOU THINK HIS HEART HAD ALREADY DIED, REALIZING YOU'D NEGLECTED YOUR DUTY TO HIM?

KEEP SHOUTIN' AN' MAYBE YOU WON'T HEAR THE SOUND OF YOUR OWN GUILT.

WHAT? WHAT DID YOU SAY?

...HHH... I SAID... "KEEP SHOUTIN'..."

"AN' MAYBE YOU WON'T HEAR..."

"...THE SOUND OF YOUR OWN GUILT..."

HRAHH!

GUHH

CRASH

IS THERE A CODE OF ETHICS, YOU FOOL? IS THERE A STANDARD BY WHICH YOUR ADVERSARIES TREAT YOU --

-- WHEN THEY HAVE YOU PRISONER?

WHACK

WELL, I DON'T NEED TO PLAY BY THE RULES OF YOUR SAD LITTLE GAME, SPIDER-MAN. YOU DIDN'T PLAY BY THE RULES OF MINE.

SO LISTEN TO ME, AND LISTEN WELL: YOU'RE *FINISHED.*

YOUR NECK IS BROKEN. YOU'LL NEVER WALK AGAIN.

I HOPE IT BURNS ON YOUR HEART *FOREVER.*

FOREVER. I'M GOING TO BE STUCK LIKE THIS FOREVER.

I'VE BEEN THROUGH A MILLION LEVELS OF DESPAIR, BUT NONE LIKE *THIS*. THERE'S NOTHING I CAN DO.

I'LL NEVER WALK AGAIN. I *CAN'T*...

I CAN'T MOVE MY FINGERS. I CAN'T *THINK* STRAIGHT.

MY SPIDER SENSES... WHY DIDN'T THEY *WARN* ME ABOUT THE BOMB?

THERE'S SOMETHING *WRONG* WITH THAT, SPIDEY -- *THINK!*

I'M SUPPOSED TO BE A HERO. I'M SUPPOSED TO *FIGHT*.

FIGHT!

I DON'T LOSE.

THAT'S NOT WHO I *AM*.

I NEVER...

NEVER.

GIVE.

UP.

...HNN...
-EHH-

CLANG

WHAT --?

IS THAT A COUPLE OF GRAPES IN YOUR SPANDEX, FUSION...

...UHH...

...OR ARE YOU JUST SURPRISED TO SEE ME?

YOU CAN'T BE STANDING. YOU BROKE YOUR NECK.

MAYBE I DID...HHH...OR MAYBE...

...MAYBE THAT'S JUST WHAT YOU WANT ME...TO *THINK*...

NO! STAY *BACK!*

AH-UHH...!

YOUR NECK IS BROKEN, SPIDER-MAN -- YOU ARE PARALYZED. STOP TRYING TO CONVINCE YOURSELF OTHERWISE.

YOU DON'T STAND A CHANCE AGAINST ME. YOU'VE *LOST.*

YEAH, WELL...HHH...I DON'T *THINK* SO.

I THINK...YOU DON'T REALLY HAVE ALL THAT POWER. I THINK IT'S JUST AUTOSUGGESTION. YOU'RE JUST A POOR MAN'S MYSTERIO...

...AN' I JUST FIGURED YOU *OUT.*

VERY WELL THEN, SPIDER-MAN. HAVE IT *YOUR* WAY.

SMA-SH

YOU CAN'T WIN, YOU KNOW. YOU'RE NOT STRONG ENOUGH -- NO ONE IS.

I AM EVERYONE AND NO ONE AT ALL -- I POSSESS THE ATTRIBUTES OF A THOUSAND HEROES AND VILLAINS BECAUSE YOU ***BELIEVE*** IT TO BE SO. IT DOESN'T MATTER IF YOU KNOW MY SECRET OR NOT. YOU CAN'T FIGHT ME.

A LONG TIME AGO -- WHEN I WAS A CHILD -- I FOUND MYSELF GIFTED WITH THE INNATE ABILITY TO ***PERSUADE.*** I FOUND I COULD SIMPLY SNAP MY FINGERS AND WATCH AS LIFE WAS HANDED TO ME ON A PLATE.

AS I GREW OLDER, I MADE MILLIONS THROUGH PERSUASION. I HONED MY POWERS, USED MY MONEY AND INFLUENCE TO DEVELOP SYSTEMS THAT WOULD ENHANCE MY ABILITIES... AND HAVE ARRIVED HERE.

I HAVE BECOME A MORE-THAN PERFECT KILLING MACHINE. THOSE OFFICERS WHO DIED AT THE EDGAR BUILDING... THEIR GUNS DIDN'T EXPLODE -- I TOLD THEM ALL TO COMMIT SUICIDE.

IT IS THE CURSE OF THE WEAK-MINDED THAT WHILE THEY ARE AWARE OF WHAT IS HAPPENING, THEY STILL CANNOT STAND AGAINST ME.

THE SAME IS TRUE OF YOU, SPIDER-MAN. YOU DON'T HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO BLOCK ME OUT --

HMM? SORRY, DID YOU SAY SOMETHING? I GUESS I KINDA SWITCHED OFF THERE --

YOU *WILL* PAY HEED, SPIDER-MAN -- YOU CAN NO MORE FIGHT MY POWERS OF SUGGESTION THAN A DAISY COULD STOP AN ARMORED CAR.

YOU KNOW ME TO BE FUSION, BUT YOUR SENSES TELL YOU IT IS DOCTOR OCTOPUS WHO FACES YOU THIS MOMENT.

YOU'RE LOSING YOUR TOUCH, FUSION -- OL' DOC OCK'S A LOT FASTER THAN THAT!

PLUS, HE'S A CERTS WITH RETSIN MAN...

ATTACK

GUHH!

SMASSH

...YOU SMELL LIKE A LISTERINE KINDA GUY --

DOOM.

YOW!

ZZZAKT

HAMMER.

THWIP

SORRY, PAL -- NOT THIS TIME.

NO... IT CAN'T BE --

SAY, DID ANYONE LOSE A LITTLE SQUARE DOOHICKEY? I THINK IT'S PART OF SOME-ONE'S OLD, CLAPPED-OUT MASTER PLAN --

DETONATE. CODE.. ALPHA-NINE-THETA --

UH-OH.

AW, CRUD --

YEAH, THAT'S IT -- NOT SO TOUGH WITHOUT YOUR DOOHICKEY, ARE YOU?

TELL YOU WHAT: JUST FOR LAUGHS, I'LL GIVE YOU A TEN SECOND HEAD-START.

TIME'S UP!

OH, LOOK: THERE HE IS!

GET OUT OF THE WAY, BLAST YOU! **MOVE!**

YEAH... THAT'S WHAT THEY ALL SAY IN THE END --

WHACK

HHH... ONE!

STOP ME WHEN I GET TO THREE HUNDRED, YOU &@#*!

NO! YOU WILL NOT DEFEAT ME!

DIE.

NO.

WHAM

YOU CAN'T DEFEAT ME... YOU CAN'T...

...IT'S NOT POSSIBLE...

YOU LOST THE MOMENT YOU SET EYES ON ME, MARKLEY. YOU BEAT YOURSELF... IT WAS ALWAYS YOUR OWN LACK OF HEROISM YOU DESPISED.

BUT YOU'RE TOO FULL OF SELF-LOATHING TO SEE IT, AREN'T YOU? THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN YOU AND ME IS STRENGTH OF WILL.

FOR JUST A MOMENT YOU HAD ME BELIEVING THAT IT WAS ME WHO KILLED THREE HUNDRED PEOPLE. BUT THEY DIED BECAUSE YOU'RE A COWARD --

9986

JOEY

CRASH.

SCREECH

AW, NO!

HEADS UP, PEOPLE! COMING THROUGH!

=HH-UHH!=

SCREEE

MARKLEY!

A BROKEN NECK -- REAL OR IMAGINED -- IS THE SORT OF THING CAN GIVE YOU A SENSE OF CLARITY.

LOOKING AT TODAY'S EVENTS FROM A DISTANCE, I CAN SEE HOW MARKLEY USED THE DEATH OF HIS SON AS AN EXCUSE TO MAIM AND KILL.

I TOOK WHAT HAPPENED TO MY UNCLE BEN AND USED IT AS MY CATALYST FOR SPIDER-MAN. SAME PROBLEM, DIFFERENT EXCUSE, I GUESS.

SO, WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM TODAY'S LESSON..?

SNIFF SNIFF

HERE YA GO, BARKS... DON'T FORGET TO CHEW.

SLAP

SNIFF

...THAT THERE'S A FINE LINE BETWEEN HERO AND PSYCHO, I GUESS.

END